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Title: Blue mold found on Kentucky tobacco

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Writer: Bruce Schreiner

Lead:

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A fungus that damages tobacco plants was found in Eastern Kentucky and has spread in the first reported U.S. outbreak this year, a tobacco specialist said yesterday.

Blue mold was found on young tobacco plants being raised at two locations in anticipation of spring planting in Magoffin County, about 170 miles east of Louisville, said University of Kentucky tobacco pathologist Kenny Seebold. The outbreak caused a total loss for the two farmers affected and had spread to neighboring Morgan County, he said.

Seebold said the outbreak was about a month earlier than usual in Kentucky, the nation's top producer of burley, an ingredient in cigarettes. It marked the second straight year the nation's first tobacco blue mold report came from Kentucky.

"With us almost out of the tobacco business, that was really shocking," Magoffin County agricultural extension agent Russell Sparks said of the outbreak.

Burley production in the Appalachian county once covered about 800 acres but has dwindled below 100 acres, Sparks said.

Seebold said blue mold was reported in Morgan County at three locations where tobacco seedlings also were being raised for eventual planting.

The disease caused a total loss at those locations, he said. Another case was reported by Seebold in Boyle County late yesterday.

Blue mold can reduce yields if unchecked and in worst cases can kill tobacco plants.

With tobacco planting under way across Kentucky, Seebold urged growers to apply chemicals to tobacco still in greenhouses or outdoor float beds, he said. Eastern Kentucky farmers should consider the same for planted tobacco.

"We're alarmed, but we're urging people to be rational," Seebold said. "Don't panic -- just

scout the plants and go ahead and begin protective fungicide application and just assume there's a level of risk."

Seebold said recent cool, wet weather was ideal for the disease.

He said officials weren't sure what caused the outbreak. It could have come in on tobacco plants shipped from the South or could have originated locally.

Last year, blue mold caused minimal loss, he said. However, an outbreak cost Kentucky growers an estimated \$200 million in 1996, when burley production was much higher. Kentucky produced 143.5 million pounds of burley last year, the state's smallest burley crop since 1927, as many farmers quit growing the crop after a tobacco buyout that ended Depression-era federal production and price controls.

University of Kentucky tobacco production specialist Gary Palmer has predicted a slight increase in burley acreage this year. Most of the production is in Central and Western Kentucky.

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